

March 25, 1997  
Oral History of Grace Martinson Finn  
by Evelyn S. McClure

GF: My mother came over to this country all by herself when she was 17.

EM: Where'd she come from?

GF: She came from Denmark. She went through the rigors of Ellis Island. And then they pinned an address on her little suit and she went to live with an aunt and uncle in Wisconsin, Redwing, WI. She stayed with them for awhile and got a job on her own and she lived with a family that had three children. My mother did all the washing, ironing, all the fruit canning and housecleaning and she was 17.

EM: This was in the country, in Wisconsin? Not in the City?

GF: Yes, and my Dad came over when he was a year old with his other 8 brothers and sisters.

EM: What was your mother's maiden name?

GF: Marianne Eleanora "Nora" Henningsen (sp?) My dad settled then in the same area, around Wisconsin and Minnesota. My mother was an avid reader.

EM: Your father's name was? GF: Martin Nils Martinsen.

**GF:** My mother was always reading about this wonderful country. She spoke beautiful English. I've had aunts and uncles come from Denmark and you could hardly understand them.

EM: She didn't go to school here to learn English, just picked it up?

GF: She was reading about this wonderful place called California. On her own, she came out here. Being as she had family and friends in Minnesota and Wisconsin she went back there. I've gathered from some of the stories she told, she was a pretty little thing, the fellows were chasing her. She was always saying she was running out in the wheatfields. One time she went back and was visiting with cousins and met Martin and came back to California again and they corresponded. Around 1900 they were married. First child was born in 1901.

EM: But they'd known each other a number of years before they married?

GF: My mother was always going back and forth.



EM: How did she travel back and forth? GF: To begin with while she was still in Minnesota, she made enough money to send for her next oldest sister. There were 12 children in the family. So when the sister came over the two of them worked together to send over for another sibling. And then the third one, by that time they were thinning out over there and my grandmother was very homesick for the kids, so all the kids saved their money and sent for grandma, mother I should say. Everything was great but whenever she got homesick she would come over. She did that 16 times. Eleven kids were paying for it. I don't recall what the passage was, it was steerage anyway. All the Henningsen's are real gutsy people. They were working someplace in Oakland and someone had told my parents there was a wonderful place down around Turlock. There were a lot of Scandinavian's down there. So nothing would do that what ever money they had they bought an apricot ranch there. Mother could not stand the heat, it was too much. And she was pregnant with a second baby so they came back to Oakland and in a couple years after that (there were six of us, the four oldest ones are five years apart) When they came back there was the San Francisco earthquake and anyone that could use a saw, hammer or nail, well my Dad was right in there. So he became a carpenter, from then on he was a carpenter until he died. Someone said about all this wonderful country up north of San Francisco. My mother was packing to go again. They moved up here to Sebastopol down near the lagoon. The first winter the lagoon just swelled and practically drowned them so they gave up that piece of ground and bought 3 acres on the hill.

EM: Did they move into a house already built?

GF: Oh no, my Dad came from Oakland in his spare time by horse and buggy to build a cabin, before they moved up. I have no pictures of what it looked like. I don't think my mother ever talked about it. But in the meantime they bought this 3 acres across the road and my Dad built a very nice house there. That's where the kids all grew up and the two uncles, Henningsen, that moved up, Jens and Nils, moved up to Blucher Valley. And they had their families there and we came very close. 4 or 5 miles we had to walk over the hill to Blucher Valley to see the relatives.

EM: When your parents were totally up in Sebastopol your father did carpentry work.

GF: Yes, he built homes and patched up the church.

EM: Where exactly was their home near the Laguna.?

GF: On Cooper Rd., about 3 miles from town. I can remember going to church with the horse and buggy.

EM: You went to school in Sebastopol, I assume?



GF: I went to high school but walked to Gold Ridge School for grade school, it was a mile or so. I enjoyed all my school years I had a lot of fun.

EM: What did you do after high school?

GF: Then I went to Santa Rosa for about a year and worked for Renault, the automobile people. About that time my husband's uncle, Sidney Finn, had a large apple orchard so did Albert Finn in Sebastopol and this tall skinny guy used to come up to pick apples. I was going with a very nice fellow, Robert Morris. I was 16. I had gone to summer institute at Tahoe and I met this vivacious girl, Esther Foster she is now, and we bummed around together and we came back. She went to church, she was visiting uncle Sid and she come up to me and says I'd like you to meet my brother, he was tall, he was so skinny you could see through him, I have a grandson that reminds me of him. Anyway here was Es walking off with my boy friend. Five years later I married Wesley, and we had 57 years of marriage.

EM: You were talking about Luther Burbank, do you want to tell me about that?

GF: Oh, I don't know anything about him. EM: Your experiences of observing him or having seen him?

GF : My sister Anna died when I was 5, so I must have been 8-10 years old. We would walk from Cooper Rd., it wasn't called that then, up to the cemetery, and that was a good 5-10 miles round trip. Here was this tall man and he was working on his farm. He came us some of those purple potatoes. He said you take them home and boil them and they'll be white. So that's about all I know, every time we'd go by he wave or if he was close to the fence he'd talk to us.

EM: Were there other people working on his property?

GF: No I don't remember seeing anyone.

**Grace's son, Richard enters conversation and talks about family history/genealogy.**

GF: My dad's family stayed in Minnesota and Wisconsin. My parents married there and they came to California, they thought this was a better place with winter cold.

(her father) Martin Nils Martinson 1871-1936. 9 children

GF: I think its remarkable they actually had pictures taken then. I remember when I was 12 years old we went to Santa Rosa to have our family picture taken. I remember having to sit still, don't move your head, don't do anything, just look at that bunny rabbit or whatever.



Richard and Wanda are thinking of getting a motor home and going back to Wisconsin/Minnesota to trace family members or history. We got a letter this morning from my 94 year old sister, she sent some stuff for Richard. Some names, he'll be looking through libraries and graveyards also.

EM: Did you try anything on the internet.?

Richard: Yeah, zero, no help.

GF: He gets about 100 emails a day.

Richard: Not on my mother's side, I've gotten some real help on my father's mother's side. Some breakthroughs. I've done different queries in Minnesota counties.

EM: To historical societies?

RF: Yes.

EM: Why don't we talk about your school days in Sebastopol?  
How many schoolmates did you have and what subjects did you take?

GF: Well you know Jetta (Georgetta Drago Myler) We've been friends since freshman in high school and we graduated in 1936. 61 years. I don't drive and I'm not able to walk any distance so I'm hooked into this computer and so I have cards and I send cards. I remember going to Gold Ridge School and going barefoot to school. Sand all in that area, apparently it was a river bottom at one time and the sand wasn't sandy sand but it was sandy soil. I don't remember too much. We were four grades and a room, there were two rooms. Two teachers. Four grades. I remember Mrs. Watson, she was in the 5th to 8th grade. She was an old lady and she used to go to sleep and while she was sleeping we did all kinds of things. Her grandson would bicycle out from Sebastopol and ask for money. I assume he was in high school at that time, he was a big kid. and Mrs. Watson would just go to sleep and always in the morning the first thing we all sang for an hour, "The Lonesome Cavalier" or something. I remember belting that out for all we were worth.

Miss Clark was the superintendent for I guess Sonoma County. You never knew when she was coming. I remember seeing her coming, getting out of her car and coming up on the porch and then we didn't see her anymore, we thought she'd gone into the other classroom. Instead she was listening to what was happening in either classroom. You never knew what she was up to.

EM: Do you remember any of your teachers from high school?



GF: I loved all of them, Mr. Knight, Mr. Irish I used take his love notes to Esther (I forget what her last name was). I took art from her and English from him. They were always passing notes and I would take it to Esther. Mr. (?) who taught singing, he gave me the best grades and I couldn't sing worth a darn.

GF: I was the first girl president of my class. I enjoyed school.

EM: Was the railroad around, did you ride the Petaluma and Santa Rosa.?

GF: No, they came out by bus then. I can't remember these names, He was also ...the woodworking, whatever you call that class. I should remember those names. I never forget we were on the bus. That was the only black boy that was in school at all. I guess it was a reaction to that fact cause he was always cutting up. (EM: This was a classmate of yours?) Yes, he was on the same bus I was, it went around to Blucher Valley, I don't know where he lived. It was raining, this kid was cutting up and the driver told him to get off the bus, I guess the kid had to walk home.

EM: Did you have dances?

GF: I wasn't allowed to dance, I belonged to the Methodist church. There were dances at school. That hurt. When I graduated with top honors and not being able to go to the dance, the senior prom or whatever they called it.

EM: Did we talk about your meeting your husband.

GF: Oh yes, (my sister-in-law, Esther Foster, married Walt Foster, 16 yrs coach at Analay High. They had 4 boys, two are coaches)

EM: Did you work after you were married?

GF: I was a private switchboard operator at the large dept. store in Oakland. My husband was in the Berkeley Fire Dept. 30 years and 1/2 day and they brought him home in the fire engine with sirens going. I think it was the closest to seeing Wes with tears in his eyes.

EM: Since you were raised in Sebastopol, but you got married and left?

GF: My sister Ruth was still here and by that time my sister, Irene, the oldest sister, had moved to Santa Rosa. So we were coming back and forth all the time anyway and I had a cousin here. One of the Mills' daughters lived here in the (mobil home) park. After Wes retired, we sold the house in Berkeley and came up here thinking we were going to move into something and we came in here and there was a man sitting out in front of this unit. Wes stopped and asked if he knew of anyplace for



sale. He said well this one sure is, so we looked at it, but his wife was working on a tuxedo and said it would take a couple months and didn't want to move now. We put our furniture in storage in Santa Rosa and to my sister's chicken ranch. So what are we going to do? We decided to go to England to find out where my husband's father came from. While we were there we made all kinds of friends and we went to the holy land. My daughter's mother and father-in-law, they were in England and planned to go to the holy land and said why not come with us? And we did. We came back. We left about Feb. /March and now it was getting pretty cold, August/October, 1972. We belonged to the British American Club. They had only one seat. It started to snow. We had been to the holy land we'd gotten three nativity sets. With a big camel, Mary, Jesus, Joseph, 3 wise men, sheep and cows. And I had wrapped them all in our underwear, dirty or clean. Anyway while I was packaging them, to send them home, they were heavy, Wes went to downtown London and came back and says this trip with Alice and Felix has a vacancy, do you want to go? I said sure! So we went around the world. We paid \$500 from London to Katmandu. We had to pay for our food and bed and that averaged 50 cents a night. The food was what the natives were eating. I made some nylon bags that we would put food into. In Afghanistan.

EM: How did you travel? GF: On rickety old bus, a group of 28 people.

EM: Wow, around the world on a bus!

GF: We flew from Katmandu. EM: Did you take pictures?

GF: I've got so many pictures. That was the reason we got a Tandy computer. i was going to file and crossfile so that if I wanted to look at cathedrals around the world all I had to do was pull them up or whatever. I haven't done any of that, I've gotten involved in the internet. I have from Austrailia, New Zealand, England, Trinidad, people we have met, they're on the internet, plus my nieces and nephews keeps me very busy. I have a high school girl that comes cause my hands are so. She is copying from my dairies and I'll have to proof read and then I hope to be able to put pictures in.

EM: Did you keep a diary on your travels?

GF: Extensive diary. I made a little book. Way back, 70s. I'll give you one. We've been twice around the world with the same company. It wasn't first class I can tell you.

EM: You probably got to some more interesting places?

GF: Did we ever. That's why I'm anxious to have this girl put it on computer and I can add things. You see, when I typed it out and took it to a lady in town who proof read it typed it out and packaged it up. Well it



turned out it isn't as thick as my finger by the time it got into print. But there's so much more I could have taken out of the diary and put in there, funny things. Like for instance, we were late, we'd had a flat tire on the bus, and the bus driver had to change it themselves. I don't know whether they telephoned or what that we would supposed to be there (the hotel, I guess you could call it that) so we knew it was getting dark and we weren't going to make it. We were driving along, there was this big long building and it said something which of course most of us didn't know what it said. Our courier got out and came back, laughing so hard. We said, well don't they want us? Oh yes, he says they can accommodate us nicely. Well we said what happened? And we don't even have to dress for dinner. We said what do you mean? I went in there and I was about ready to sign up and I said we're not dressing for dinner, we're casual. The desk person, said oh you misunderstand me, this is a nudist colony. That type of thing, I've got scads of those stories.

EM: That's a great project

GF: Yes, and I have Richard, he lives in Livermore, my oldest daughter, Karen, lives in Idaho Falls, Paula is in Seattle, WA. Grandkids (6) scattered all over. That computer really keeps me busy. FISH, Friends in Sonoma Helping, you pick up the phone and they will take you to the doctor, its volunteers that drive you.

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